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THE USE OF HEBREW TO A MINISTER

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In its bearings on the preparation for the work of the ministry the question, Is Hebrew worth while? is a live one. Like most questions, it has more than one side. I may declare at the outset my own conviction. In the practical work of the ministry Hebrew is not only worth while, but in these times comes near being essential if the work is to be done in a thorough way. Hebrew should, therefore, not only be a part of every seminary curriculum, but should be required for graduation.

I have not room to discuss all the reasons that have been offered on the other side. I can only put together in the briefest way those that have struck me as especially forcible. I confess that they make a very strong case—far stronger than can be represented in my brief statement. I have seen and heard it said by very influential men that the demands made upon the minister today, especially if he be in charge of a city church, leave no time for delving into Hebrew; that this is not to be regretted, as he has little need to know about the long-gone days when Hebrew was a living language and produced a literature; that the learning of the language will draw upon time which, if invested elsewhere, will yield larger returns; that the minister needs to be trained with reference to present-day events, and that a Hebrew classroom is likely to send him forth more or less out of touch with the vital movements of the age which will speedily demand all his attention; that in giving so much time to such studies the seminary is training a man to be a Semitic specialist or professor rather than a minister.

I trust I can appreciate these arguments at their true value. But from most of them I entirely dissent. I know well enough from my own experience in the calling that in addition to a minister's regular work there are all sorts of unexpected and peculiar demands, day and night, from all sorts of people in all sorts of

trouble, from societies, secret orders, unions, camps of veterans, and so on and on. Many of these things are wholly foreign to his vocation; and if he speedily becomes known in the community as a man unwilling to talk and act about matters of which he knows nothing, he and his work will be the gainers in more than one direction. But even after he succeeds in getting and keeping his energies in their proper channel, he is a busy man. The work to be done on the narrowest professional basis, say some, leaves no time for Hebrew. On the contrary—and I am keeping here entirely within the limits of my experience—Hebrew, when systematically prosecuted, is one of the greatest time-savers known. In a surprisingly short time after the study is begun, it will yield a hundred-fold for all the labor spent upon it.

The minister must ordinarily provide for at least two sermons a week; must select and develop topics with reference to congregations which are practically unvarying in their constitution from Sunday to Sunday. And however we may deplore the lack of attention of some listeners, there are sure to be others who will remind us, if in our despair we ever dare fall back on an old sermon, that two years ago we preached on that text, and found the same points in it. A good working knowledge of Hebrew will do great things toward eliminating the problems of time, topic, and labor that seem to have fastened themselves so tenaciously to many ministerial careers. Select any Old Testament book you please, and study it with the best lexical, grammatical, and other apparatus to be had—of course keeping in mind as you proceed the work of the Sundays and the plain people with plain needs and no scholarship you must then meet—and your note book will accumulate sermons far faster than you can use them. Hebrew will be found to be the quickest and safest route to the sermon ever tried. I have known several ministers whose nerves almost collapsed under the constant strain of selecting texts and making sermons out of them. Why should there have been a strain? None of these men knew either Hebrew or Greek; and, with all their toils and sufferings, their best was mediocre or worse. Now I do not claim of course that the knowledge of Hebrew is going to make a preacher. But if the preacher be without this knowledge, he is placed at a grave disadvantage,

from which nothing short of the acquisition will relieve him. Nor can it truthfully be said that sermons dug from among Hebrew roots are dry, have a scholastic odor, and are remote from present conditions. Other things being equal, the man who has gone to the sources for his sermon is more likely to interest and benefit the average man than one who does not know the way to the sources. Then, too, sermons are supposed to deal in some way or other with the principles of morals and character as they are developed in the Bible. They cannot reliably and authoritatively be drawn forth from this book except through the close study of it in the form in which it has come to us.

If the minister carries into the pulpit the shavings and tools of the workshop instead of the finished product, that exhibition of pedantry, or the lack of common sense, as the case may be, points to a personal defect that lies much deeper than his knowledge of Hebrew. A seminary professor may fail to appreciate the point of view and needs of the minister, and may discipline his men as though their life's work were to be the discovery of the key to the Hittite language or research in Semitic philology. If so, the professor is certainly in the middle of a stage on which is being played a tragedy, and the authorities that retain him have set out the trappings. But to say that Hebrew ought therefore to be discarded from the course looks to me like shifting the blame from the abuser to the abused. There are some things in most seminary courses for which the minister has no particular use. Perhaps he finds that some things there taught really hamper him, and he must needs unlearn them. But no preacher who has once taken Hebrew along as one of his daily working tools, and found in his experience the surprising number of uses to which it can be put, will ever regard the study of it as of subordinate importance.

I suppose most men who preach sermons, in theory at least, consider that one of the purposes of the sermon is to impart instruction: it is more or less consciously addressed to the intelligence of the auditor. If there is no such purpose, the sermon will have made no demand on the speaker's mind, can make none on the hearer's, and will not be worth thirty minutes of the time of either. The text-book of this instruction is the Bible.

We rarely hear a sermon begin without the announcement of a text. We often hear sermons that immediately abandon the text; but that is the weakness of the preacher, and is another matter. The Bible is likely to maintain its present place in the teaching work of the church. But whether the use to which it there be put is teaching, worship, or something else, the situation, as regards the preacher's knowledge or ignorance of Hebrew, is not altered. Now the Bible was not written in English. The two great languages in which it has come to us abound in words which had an entirely different origin and development from those of the English equivalents which must be used to translate them. This is, of course, much more noticeable in Hebrew than in Greek. To cite only one instance: one of the common words in the Hebrew Old Testament is *Torah*. The English word generally employed in our versions to render it is 'law.' But 'law' has an entirely different origin and history from *torah*; the denotation of the two words coincides only in part while their connotations differ widely. In many instances 'law' does not convey to the English reader what *torah* conveys to the reader of the Hebrew, and in some places it is positively misleading,

It is true that he who uses words in speaking or writing with strict respect to their origin and growth is a pedant. Many men who speak correctly know nothing and care nothing for such things. We use words with reference to their present-day meaning; and a brief comparison of the Authorized and the Revised Versions of the English Bible will show that even in a literary language the significance of words shifts surprisingly in a comparatively short time. But still the origin and growth of words determine, more extensively than we may imagine, the thought, impression, feeling, which they awaken in the mind of one in whose presence they are uttered. Most words retain at least something of their primitive signification. If a word's main force at the present time is a later acquisition, still this is generally qualified, limited, restricted, toned, colored, by its origin in some fine way, of which we in using it may not be conscious. We select a word as the medium of our thought with reference to this qualified significance. When a synonym is proposed, we feel that it cannot play the part of a substitute. Sometimes in writing or speaking

we know that there is just one word to express the meaning we wish our sentence to convey. With that word it embodies our whole idea: without it our idea is dwarfed, enlarged, one-sided—in some manner deformed. We can think of words that almost do. They make good sense, perhaps better rhetoric; but somehow they do not fit. When we finally hit upon the right one, we can give no reason for preferring it: we merely feel that it is the word. These lights and shadows, shades and intensities of words, enter largely into the value of a language as an instrument of speech and into the power and beauty of its literature. Here we may look for much of the difference between two languages. This is one of the main reasons why translations are always inadequate.

In vocabulary Hebrew and English widely diverge, for the reason that the former had small influence in the formation of the latter. When the school-boy takes up Greek—and this is still more true of Latin—he immediately sees points of contact between that language and his own. In every line of his Caesar he meets words whose meanings are suggested by similar words that he daily uses. Latin, Greek, and English have in common many principles of grammar. But in Hebrew not only have we no derived words to assist us in gaining a vocabulary, but how far removed from anything we have heretofore known are the rules of its syntax! In the verb, for instance, there is no time element, no past, present, or future: in our verb, time is a controlling factor. In countless instances no translation can bring over the main force of a Hebrew verb without a circumlocution, which is impossible. These are not simply matters of nice distinctions. They frequently make the difference between the true and false interpretation of a passage. No man can discover the real idea in the mind of the writer of a Hebrew sentence unless he has access to the language. There is again that indefinable thing known as the genius or spirit of a literature, which cannot be adequately expressed in words or in any other material shape, because it is spiritual; which is not to be seen, or to be found by logic or philology, but which must be felt. I do not believe that any one can have a knowledge of the Old Testament sufficient to qualify him to be a teacher of it unless he has experienced this

spirit of its literature, which cannot be preserved in a rendering. To quote from Professor George Adam Smith: "Do not believe that the end of an accurate study of the Hebrew language is simply familiarity with a number of grammatical forms more or less obscure. Painstaking students are otherwise rewarded. It is they who lay their hands on the prophet's heart and feel it beat; it is they who across the ages see the very features of his face as he calls; it is they into whom his style and his music pass."

No matter how excellent an Old Testament translation may be, the finest and best must be lost in the passage from one language to the other. One may be familiar with the story of Homer's epics, may have an intimate acquaintance with the best English renderings, may be exceptionally gifted as a teacher, but no one would admit the right of a man who does not know Greek to teach Homer. When the preacher announces a text from the Old Testament, he assumes the rôle of teacher of the passage he has chosen. True, we hear much said of the "devotional" treatment of the Bible, whatever that may mean. If it means a treatment with little or no reference to the mind of the man who wrote it, it is dishonest, and likely to lead the hearer to deal falsely with the Bible; if this treatment ignores the primary fact that man is a rational being, it is sure to be some sort of slovenly gush with nothing virile. No safe distinctions can be drawn between the scholastic and devotional study of the Bible. Indeed, it is deep down in the fundamentals of the language, hiding away in the roots of Hebrew words and in the crevices and corners of that language's grammar, that we will find some of the richest spiritual treasures, some of the most beautiful and most fragrant flowers. The appeal to the spiritual and intellectual in man is one. Fortunate indeed is the preacher who can walk with sure foot the field of Hebrew literature, a language as rugged as the land in which it lived; can look around its heavy boulders, and pluck from under their damp shade the violets, and hand them over to the old saint who waits upon his Sabbath morning message. That saint is no scholar, but he knows the fragrance and beauty of violets; and in the gratitude that lights the face the preacher is blessed in the doing.

The minister has no access to some of the finest helps on the Old Testament unless he has a working knowledge of Hebrew; to none of them has he more than a very partial access without this knowledge. The Lexicon of Brown, Driver, and Briggs has sermons in every column; it illumines the whole field and explains the details. If he does not know Hebrew it is as useless in a minister's library as a pile of brick. With this knowledge, it is of more practical worth than all the scholastic theology and devotional literature that could be packed in the rolling stock of a transcontinental railway. The International Critical Commentary is the greatest achievement in English in the interpretation of the Bible. It cannot be ignored when the meaning of a passage of Scripture is sought. No one is in a position to handle its volumes on the Old Testament if he has failed to master Hebrew. The power to use this great work and reap its magnificent harvest would alone repay the time and labor involved in providing one's self with the tool. Indeed, the value of any reliable work on any phase of the Old Testament, though it be written in a popular style, is increased enormously if the reader can accompany the author to the sources. Such works are entirely too numerous to cite here. But I may mention a recent contribution to biblical study which it may be safely supposed every minister who makes any pretension to keeping abreast of the age has at hand—Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible. It can be used, and most profitably, by any thoughtful person; but no one untrained in Hebrew can begin to measure its importance. I know one man who proposed to put the modern languages, especially German, in the place of the Hebrew in the regular seminary course. This looks to me like advising a man to spend all his substance for an ax-helve and leave himself without the means to procure an ax. German, particularly, is exceedingly valuable to the man who knows Hebrew. In that case he cannot better employ his time than in acquiring it. If he knows neither Hebrew nor German, he should acquire Hebrew first. The Germans certainly surpass all other peoples in the number of valuable works on the Bible. The two series of German commentaries on the Old Testament, the *Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, and the *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten*

Testament, have not yet been equalled. Neither these nor numerous other German works could be accurately used without the knowledge of Hebrew. Now it is little short of ludicrous to expect men to stand before the people as teachers of the Bible, and to perform in the community the service of authorities on the Bible, when they have access neither to the original Bible itself nor to the best work that is being done on the Bible. I doubt if such a lack of professional equipment would be tolerated in any other calling.

Not in his Sunday labors only, but always and everywhere, the minister is considered an authority on all matters pertaining to the Bible. His estimate of himself may not be so extravagant. But his average fellow-citizen, if more considerate than to expect him to furnish at a moment's notice the details of any and every aspect of present-day biblical knowledge, does expect him to know where and how to get this information. This demand is not unjust. If a man is not willing to be, and to be regarded as, a specialist on the Bible, and to have men seek of him reliable opinions, he should resign from the ministry. The merchant owes it not only to his bank account and his own family, but especially to the community in which his business is a servant, to carry a complete stock. The minister needs to realize that one of the duties he owes to his church and to the place of his residence—and by no means his least important—is of the same kind. And in the light of his own ideal of this service he should regard it as immoral and dishonest to carry in stock shelf-worn commodities, left-overs from previous seasons, and dilapidated stuff bought on some one's bargain counters. The man who comes to him for information may find his wants supplied in this kind of stock; or the minister, being ignorant of the standards of value in his own business, may represent what he has as better than it is; or he may even condescend to deliberate deception rather than have his customer go to some one better qualified to serve. But satisfying an inquirer is not the only nor the chief end in view. Any sort of sophistry will generally do that. But the great thing for the minister to understand, when such an occasion arises, is that he has an opportunity, a privilege; that his questioner is interested enough in the Bible to go to the pains

of looking up some one to answer his questions; that he may possibly be able to stimulate these motives and lead the seeker out into the broad fields of biblical learning. If he can succeed in gathering around him a little group of young people or of ambitious Sunday-school teachers—or even one such person—for the purpose of studying the Bible in the original, he may justly regard that as a part of the finest fruit of his ministry.

A thorough, just, honest opinion on some of the most vital questions of the day cannot be formed except through the study of the Hebrew language. One of these is the higher criticism. The daily press and popular religious literature between them have given this subject a great deal of free advertising in recent years. In a certain way, mostly a very perverted way, it has filtered down among the people, and has produced in individual cases quite a variety of interesting psychological results. Some who wish to pose as smart, mostly young and inexperienced people, think they have received the full license for atheism, and that the thought of the age has proclaimed the Bible worthy of no man's serious attention. Some who have tried long and faithfully to live the righteous life, whose experience of the grace of God is far more profound than their knowledge of the conclusions of scholars, have had their faith rudely shaken and their peacefulness agitated by what they have heard of criticism from some third or fourth class source. Some intelligent man, a sincere inquirer after truth, who is not in the church, but who would make a valuable addition to the church, who has no desire to parade his independence or to appear as a freethinker, will drop into the minister's study some evening for expert opinion if he has reason to believe he will receive such. It is clearly a part of the pastoral vocation to handle these and all other classes of men who may be affected by biblical questions of the day in the way that will best promote their characters. He cannot, without a first-hand knowledge of the field such as we demand in his respective department of the physician, the lawyer, the chemist, the architect. Now you can start no Old Testament question that does not run right back, generally along perfectly straight lines, into the Hebrew text. All study above the original is superficial, unreliable, and second-hand, or worse.

Recently something like a breach has begun to appear between the ministry and biblical scholarship. This is perhaps most noticeable in the Old Testament field. Semitic research has met with rich rewards; the vastness of the unexplored ocean that rolls away is now appreciated, and Semitic specialists who have nothing to do with the ministry are associated with our universities. On the other hand the minister, in the midst of complex social conditions and an enormous mass of religious reading matter in his own tongue at hand, at the very beginning of his career finds the temptation strong to abandon the Hebrew he has brought out of the seminary as a useless weight on the journey. Too often he is in utter ignorance of what the Semitic specialist is doing, is too ignorant to appreciate his aims or to understand what he gives the world, even of the names of foremost scholars. Frequently on his library shelves is not to be found a single authoritative work on the Old Testament. Often his general feeling, so far as he has any, is that the scholar is an enemy of the faith, and is deliberately working to destroy all revealed religion. The time to close this breach is now. If it goes on to get wider, it is going to result in trouble for the ministry and the church. Semitic research will continue, whatever may happen to the ministry and the church. The only way to close the breach is for the minister to become a scholar, to get better acquainted with the book he teaches, and to keep up with the progress of biblical science. Investigators have already rendered to Christianity a service which is beyond all calculating; their service in the past would have been still greater if the ministry had been quicker to appreciate it; they have still greater gifts for the future. It becomes the ministry, then, to put itself in a receptive attitude, to get in intelligent sympathy with the work that must always remain fundamental to all progress in Bible study and to all the practical work of the church.

The varied work expected of the minister in this day is no valid excuse for neglecting Hebrew. A surgeon might with equal propriety plead demands upon his time as a reason for not becoming acquainted with certain standard professional instruments. It is his business to know them. In like manner it is the minister's business to know Hebrew. And in both cases

alike the business should appeal to the conscience with all the imperativeness and sacredness that duty can impart. Furthermore, I have pointed out how it is a time-saver. The ease with which Hebrew can be acquired now, in comparison with the difficulties of the study in former days, more than compensates for the fact that the study must now be carried on in a more complex professional life. Yet, in spite of his many duties, I suppose there is no minister today who is living such a laborious and nerve-racking life as John Knox. We are told that when more than forty years of age he discovered that the knowledge of Hebrew would be worth all the pains that acquisition involved, and he found the time to perform the task he thus set for himself. We may profit by his example.

The day has gone—or certainly is rapidly going—when the minister may expect anything from the mere wearing of the cloth. Priestcraft thrives on superstition and ignorance. These are passing. The minister must now establish his worth in the place where he resides as a man, a Christian, and a scholar. He will be respected and appreciated accordingly. Knowledge is all the time becoming more widely disseminated, education is becoming more general. It is needful, then, that the intellectual ideals of the minister, the teacher of the people, should be set above any mark we can find behind us. There is unquestionably a loud cry for ministers of general culture and special scholarship. The minister who recognizes this demand of the age and tries in his individual case to meet it will give his calling and the church a prestige which they both seem to stand in need of. We want, too, people of scholarly attainments and culture in the rank and file of the church's membership, deeply interested in the church's work and aims. Too often we find such persons out of touch with the church. In many instances they feel thus because they have heard its purposes set forth only by incompetent men she has had in her pulpits. These people, though they may never attend church, are not the enemies of Christianity. In fact, if a representative of the church who is their equal in ability, and with an adequate knowledge of what is being done in connection with the Bible, could explain matters to them, the scales would in many cases fall from their eyes, and both they and the church

would be gainers. One such person is worth a hundred people equally good in point of morality but without his intellectual advantages and gifts. It is simply the case of the man with five talents over against the man with one. It is as in the matter of giving. The man of small means who has only one dollar to give, and gives it in a cheerful spirit, certainly deserves as much praise as he who out of his abundance gives a million. But, nevertheless, the million will move mountains, while the work of the one may not be perceptible in the mass. The church must count largely on a ministry thoroughly trained in the book with which it deals to interest and hold that small but controlling class of society composed of the people with many mental talents.

In our country are towns large enough to sustain a half-dozen or more churches with not a minister capable of reading the Bible except in an English translation. It is not to be wondered at that the most intelligent classes in such communities feel that their needs are not supplied by the Sunday messages accessible to them. Neither is it a wonder that there is such a thing as the ministerial "dead-line." And I venture to believe that higher scholastic attainment, Christian character still being maintained as the first essential, would in large measure solve other professional problems.